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PROGRAM CBS Evening News

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SUBJECT Spy from Space

BOB SCHIEFFER: Reported cost overruns of up to one billion dollars allegedly are jeopardizing this country's ability to spy from space.

Bill Lynch has a report.

BILL LYNCH: This is the kind of satellite photo the public sees, a Landsat image of Washington in which the Pentagon, the world's biggest office building, is little more than a blur. Nice for geographers but of little intelligence value.

These are the kind of spy-satellite photos the military can use, a prototype Soviet fighter plane seen from more than 100 miles in space. This top secret picture was inadvertently released by Pentagon censors.

Here's another one giving U.S. intelligence one of its first looks at a plane American pilots may one day go up against.

This Pentagon art, copied from spy photos, shows how clearly big Soviet weapons can be seen and counted to verify arms control agreements. But:

JOHN PIKE: There are some other things that we're going to have a little more difficulty seeing in the next couple of years?

LYNCH: Such as?

PIKE: Well, particularly prototype aircraft and prototype missiles that would be sitting out on a runway or something.

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LYNCH: Recently, Pentagon officials griped about the lack of photo intelligence on the latest battles between Iran and Iraq. The fear of some intelligence experts is that the number and quality of such satellite photos will decline because of reported cost overruns, mismanagement, and delays in launching the next-generation satellite.

Launching of that satellite, the KH-12, is still two and a half years off. It will resemble NASA's space telescope, but instead of looking at stars it will scan Soviet territory, with thermal imagery to penetrate darkness. It may also carry special radar to see through clouds.

The KH-12 is designed to replace all three current satellite types. The most advanced flashes its electronic images back almost instantly. Some develop their own film on board and can transmit it by television or eject film capsules for pickup by Air Force planes. The Russians still rely on that slow method for their spy pictures.

JEFFRE RICHELSON: I certainly think we have better systems than the Soviets, far better systems. And I think if we look at it in terms of cost-effectiveness, we're probably far superior to them.

LYNCH: Still, some intelligence professionals are disturbed at what one called the horror stories of reconnaissance failures, including an 18-month delay in discovering a huge radar, like this, under construction in Siberia that the White House now believes may violate the ABM treaty.

Congress may now inquire more deeply than ever into how this multibillion-dollar program is managed. Otherwise the nation could face gaps in vital satellite coverage of world trouble spots and of the vast Soviet fortress.